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The Carlo Monzino Collection of
Netsuke, Inro and Lacquer
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Reminiscences by Carlo Monzino

I reached London in October 1952 to study what had become the universal language after the war, planning to remain until December. Friends had arranged for me to stay with an English family as a paying guest, and my host was Mr W. W. Winkworth. It was thus quite by coincidence that I made the acquaintance of one of the foremost experts in Chinese and Japanese art.

Life in London had not changed much since 1939, except for the rubble of bombed out buildings, mostly still heaped in the very place where houses, churches and palaces had once stood. The smell of the smouldering ruins seemed almost to hang in the air. But then one of those cheerful red double decker buses would pass by (London buses and the Tube were my great favourites), leaving a sense of security in their wake, as if to say: VI and V2 rockets and the rest have come and gone, but here is London, still *caput mundi*.

W. W. Winkworth was a fascinating person of boundless learning. One day he took me along on a visit to the Wallace Collection, where he was to meet a major American expert in Chinese art (I believe it was Mr Hobson). For three hours running I witnessed an amazing barrage of questions about Chinese porcelains and pottery of all periods fired at W.W.W (as he was often called) by his American counterpart. These questions, which were answered without a moment's hesitation, and with a wealth of detail regardless of their intricate nature, ranged from debatable attributions to fake antiques, true and counterfeit cartouches, genuine and artificial patinas. Here was a lesson in Chinese art being imparted to one of the great experts in that very field!

Without the distraction of television - which had yet to come - I spent most evenings at home with Winkworth discussing art. I learned many things about Netsuke, Tsuba, Kozuka and scrolls, and started going to auctions with him, especially to Glendining's and Sotheby's.

Auctions at Sotheby's - where I often ran into a young man with a shock of blond hair, Peter Wilson - were held in a small room. Most of the time there were only seven people sitting around the table spread with a green cloth. An attendant would come in with a tray of Netsuke or Inro, and these would be passed around, each party handing the object to the next in line. Then the bidding would start, and would be over in a wink, as there were only seven of us. My being there was something of an anomaly, for I was the only foreigner (an Italian), and the only young person (21) around. Participants tended to be middle-aged, and some were decidedly old from my standpoint (as old as I happen to be now).

Prices were nothing near what they are at present. A Netsuke could be had for something between 10 shillings - the half-pound as it was known then - and £4. Living on a student's budget, I had to skip a meal if I wanted to add another netsuke to my budding collection: one could eat for £1 or £2 then, so it was a clear-cut matter of no meal or no Netsuke. I lost about 6kg in the two and a half months I spent in London - and there had been little ballast to begin with ...

Winkworth had very set ideas about Japanese objects. He considered that only objects made before the Meiji restoration of 1868 were worth collecting, because those were sure to have been made by the Japanese for the Japanese. I myself am uneasy with Netsuke carved after pockets became commonplace in Japan, with Tsuba forged after the Samurai were disarmed, with Kozuka made when the Japanese were busily buying knives in Sheffield.

My training with Winkworth also served me well when I started collecting African and Oceanic art. I still do not see much point in having objects especially made for Westerners (in the case of African art) or for the Western export trade (in the case of Japanese art after the Meiji restoration). This is not intended as a slight on the Japanese craftsmen who produced thousands of excellent objects between the end of the Nineteenth and beginning of the Twentieth Century to the delight of Western collectors.

As it is, I recall my experience in 1952 as a most exceptional and enlightening one. I continued collecting Japanese objects, assisted by Winkworth and often buying directly from him, until about 1965, when I moved on to primitive arts and the European avant-garde.

My Japanese collection has been locked away in the vault of a Lugano bank for some 30 years now. I feel the time has come to follow the example of the Goncourt brothers, who wrote, when they sold off their superb collection, that they wished to offer to others, many others, the opportunity of experiencing the joys they had known for so many years.

Carlo Monzino

Introduction

The Japan which the Americans opened to trade in 1853 was a country that had been largely closed to foreign contact for over two hundred years. The newly arrived foreigners were awe-struck by the originality of design, the beauty and sheer quality of the works of art, and even domestic artefacts, which they discovered, and it was not long before these were being exported to the West. The response to these exotic wares was enthusiastic and in a short time large and distinguished collections were formed in England, France, Germany and America. Such names as Walter Lionel Behrens, Michael Tomkinson, Harry Seymour Trower, Oscar Raphael, Henri Vever, Albert Brockhaus are legendary, and their collections set standards which remain exemplary to this day.

During the first half of this century-, Frederick Meinertzhagen, William Winkworth and Mark Hindson were in the forefront of the second generation of collectors. These three proved to be a great influence on their successors, and the present generation of collectors have much to thank them for.

Sig. Carlo Monzino is an Italian businessman who has collected art of one type or another during most of his adult life. His eclectic tastes include paintings and sculpture by contemporary artists, primitive art from Africa and Oceania and the miniature arts of Japan.

Sig. Monzino, whose collection of netsuke, inro and lacquer is described and illustrated on the following pages, purchased the majority of his pieces between 1952 and 1965, although a few were acquired at the last session of the Mark Hindson auction sale at Sotheby's in 1969. While Sig. Monzino was living in London in the early 1950's, he was befriended by William Winkworth and through him developed a great feeling for Japanese lacquer and miniature sculptural art, particularly work produced in the 17th and 18th centuries. The collection, as it stands today, reflects closely the taste of the aforementioned European collections formed during the last part of the previous and the beginning of the present century.

A large number of pieces were purchased directly from Winkworth or from auction sales, and these include many that had originally been recorded in the catalogues produced by the art historian Henri Joly for Behrens and other early collectors.

Frederick Meinertzhagen was a dealer and collector, who during his lifetime handled over 10,000 netsuke, details of which are noted in his card index, which he left to the British Museum. The Meinertzhagen card index was edited by George Lazarnick and published by Alan Liss, inc. in 1986. A large number of netsuke from the Monzino collection are to be found recorded in the index and from information on the cards it is possible to trace their history from the end of the last century, through successive connoisseurs, to their present owner.

The wide ranging collection of netsuke includes several of types illustrated in *Solum Kisho*, published in Osaka in 1781, the earliest illustrated record of netsuke and their makers. The majority of netsuke in the collection date from the 18th century and include standard subject matter such as legendary and religious figures, real and fantastic animals, genre scenes and botanical subjects. However, there are a number of examples, mainly of genre subjects, from 19th century artists, and an unusually large number of subjects which are rarely depicted in netsuke. While many of the historically regarded netsuke artists are not represented in the collection, the quality of the majority of the works by anonymous artists is of a standard rarely seen on the open market.

Among the inro and other lacquer wares, are several by Ogawa Haritsu, known as Ritsuo (1663-1747) and members of his school. Ritsuo was an unconventional artist of an eccentric nature, who produced inro and other wares with boldly executed designs, sometimes with details in pottery and other materials. Other schools of lacquerers are also strongly represented and include a number by successive generations of the Koma and Kajikawa families.

The sale also includes a small number of kiseruzutsu (pipe-cases) and tonkotsu (tobacco pouches), with caned, inlaid or lacquered designs, as well as suzuribako (writing boxes) and other lacquer wares produced from the early 17th to the late 19th century.